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C O N F I D E N T I A L CARACAS 002266

SIPDIS

NSC FOR CBARTON  
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STATE PASS USAID FOR DCHA/OTI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 07/15/2014

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [VE](#)

SUBJECT: BISHOPS URGE VOTER PARTICIPATION AND CLEAN ELECTION

Classified By: A/DCM Abelardo A. Arias, for Reason 1.4 (d)

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Summary  
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1. (U) The Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV), comprised of Venezuela's Catholic bishops, July 12 exhorted all actors participating in the August 15 presidential recall referendum to act ethically. The bishops also urged them to ensure that the process remains free of corruption and fraud so that the results, regardless of whom wins, are accepted without violence, and all voters participate in the referendum. The statement will be read during mass at all Catholic churches on July 18. Chavez supporters reacted with allegations that the hierarchy of the Catholic Church is taking an inappropriate role in politics. End Summary.

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CHURCH STATEMENT RELEASED  
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2. (U) The Episcopal Conference of Venezuela (CEV) issued a 15-point statement on July 12 urging voters to participate in the August 15 recall referendum against President Hugo Chavez. CEV President and Archbishop of Merida, Baltasar Porras, called on Venezuelan society to eradicate intolerance and exclusion, saying that at least minimum agreement was needed to build democracy. The document calls upon the military, political leaders, the media and telecommunications industry, and international observers to do their part in ensuring that the Revocatory Referendum process is transparent and just. It also specifically exhorts the National Electoral Council (CNE) to act impartially and to present the results of the referendum in a transparent manner. The CEV statement will be read to parishioners during Sunday mass July 18.

3. (U) Ramon Viloria, Bishop of Puerto Cabello said, "We are calling for transparency precisely because of the atmosphere that has been growing. We are bringing it to light now because we want absolutely no obstacles of any kind when the will of the people is manifest. That is why we are simply putting out a warning so that no organization, in this case the CNE, hampers the fulfillment of the will of the people."

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CHAVEZ SUPPORTERS REACT  
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4. (U) Chavez supporters denounced the report as evidence of the Church's bias against Chavez. Willian Lara, National Assembly deputy for Chavez's Fifth Republic Movement (MVR) said, "As a Venezuelan Catholic I am asking the bishops to understand that the Catholic Church belongs to the people of God and not to the clergy no matter how high their position. Neither the church nor its leadership, like the CEV, should be used for political campaigning that favors one side over another." Lara also called Porras a "politician in a hassock." MVR deputy Darios Vivas said the CEV should have warned the opposition parties, as they are the ones prone to violate Venezuelan law. Vivas accused the Church's leadership of having participated in the events of April 2002. In a later statement, Vice-President Jose Vincente Rangel reminded reporters that all Venezuelans are part of the Catholic "flock" despite their diverse ways of thinking. He urged the Church to avoid taking political sides.

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Comment  
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5. (C) Chavez's government and the CEV have a history of finding themselves at odds. The leadership of the Catholic Church has issued similar statements in the past, most recently in anticipation of the Reparo vote in May 2004. Chavez supporters have responded and continue to respond by attacking the Catholic Church leadership and appealing to ordinary Catholics to not allow themselves to be manipulated.

McFarland

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2004CARACA02266 - CONFIDENTIAL